



Bellwether Magazine

Volume 1
Number 84 *Fall 2015*

Article 3

Fall 2015

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Katherine Unger Baillie
University of Pennsylvania

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Recommended Citation

Baillie, Katherine Unger (2015) "In the Shelter and Out in the Community," *Bellwether Magazine*: Vol. 1 : No. 84 , Article 3.

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In the Shelter and Out in the Community

A New Vision for Penn Vet's Shelter Animal Medicine Program

BY KATHERINE UNGER BAILLIE

With approximately 7.6 million animals entering shelters around the United States each year—around 2.7 million of which are euthanized, according to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals—shelter animal medicine is a hugely important facet of the veterinary field.

In recent years, the field has been evolving from reactive to proactive care and expanding from a focus on animals to include the people and communities who can help ensure healthy homes for animals in need.

“Traditionally we’d been focusing on just the animals in the shelter, who are incredibly important and a core part of what we do,” says Dr. Brittany Watson, V’10, Director of Shelter Animal Medicine and Community Engagement at Penn Vet. “But more and more, we’re not just providing medical care to those who need it, we’re also interacting with people and doing outreach to try to prevent animals from ever entering the sheltering system in the first place.”

The Shelter Animal Medicine Program at Penn Vet is embracing all aspects of the field: working in shelters, communities, schools, and hospitals—even in individuals’ homes—to care for and decrease the daunting population of shelter animals, and to increase the likelihood that homeless animals are placed with loving families.

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—Dr. Brittany Watson, *Director of Shelter Animal Medicine and Community Engagement*





Jasmine Lee, V'16, holds her feline patient after performing spay surgery at Philadelphia's Animal Care and Control Team.

A NEW VISION

Shelter animal medicine has been offered at Penn Vet since 2006 to support the Philadelphia region's shelters and to train veterinary students in skills including surgery, infectious disease management, primary care, behavior, and emergency medicine. Watson was appointed in early 2014, and under her leadership, the program is emphasizing the human players in shelter medicine.

Watson has a strong background in shelter medicine as well as education and outreach. After earning her VMD at Penn Vet in 2010, she moved to South Carolina and began interning at an open-admission animal shelter, the Charleston Animal Society, where she found her calling.

"I absolutely loved it," Watson says. "I was able to help improve the animals' health and welfare, help the community, practice herd and public health, participate in research on best practices and training, and do humane education and outreach. The work involved not only dogs and cats, but exotic pets, farm animals, and wildlife."

During Watson's tenure there, she witnessed a growing trend in shelters that is difficult to achieve. The open-admission facility went from euthanizing the majority of animals they brought in, to saving all healthy, treatable animals. "It was a pretty amazing transition that involved the hard work of an entire team of incredibly devoted and talented professionals," she says.

While interning at the shelter, Watson was also working toward a PhD in educational administration from the University of South Carolina. As part of her dissertation research, she launched a veterinary science initiative for high school students involving at-risk schools, with lessons both in the classroom and at the shelter. The program engaged students in



discussions about science, compassion, and ethics—all of which she structured through the lens of veterinary medicine.

“I was astounded at how the students responded,” she says. “Not only did they learn the information we presented to them, but their actual attitudes and behaviors toward animals changed.”

The students who participated in the program brought their own animals into the shelter to be spayed and neutered at four times the rate of a control group. Watson also found that, without even explicitly mentioning veterinary care, discussing animal welfare improved the students’ view of the value of veterinary care, such as the importance of a yearly visit.

Watson is now translating that experience back to Penn Vet and to Philadelphia. She has been working with Penn’s Netter Center for Community Partnerships and Perelman School of Medicine to expand the Pipeline Program, which has since 1998 provided West Philadelphia high school students the chance to deeply engage in science. The Pipeline Program goes beyond textbook lessons to see how practicing researchers and clinicians—as well as undergraduate and graduate students at Penn—use science to probe medical mysteries and find answers that have an impact on societal health.

This school year, the program has added a 12th-grade curriculum focused on veterinary medicine, which Watson is leading with Penn Vet students. The high school students will explore commonalities between human and animal medicine and also focus on humane education, including lessons on animal welfare, ethics, and empathy.

“Bringing in the vet school will give really nice, different perspectives on health care, and help foster the students’ interest in science,” says Dr. Sharon Lewis, Director of the Pipeline Program and Assistant Professor of Clinical Neurology at Penn Medicine.

In April, New Bolton Center hosted a group from Sayre High School as part of the Pipeline Program, introducing the 18 West Philadelphia students to a cow and two horses while rotating through clinics on cardiology, neurology, and gastrointestinal medicine.



On April 25, World Veterinary Day, Penn Vet staff and students volunteered with Pets for Life at an event providing free pet vaccines and wellness information for residents in the Hunting Park neighborhood of Philadelphia. At right, Dr. Brittany Watson supervises a vaccination.



DOOR TO DOOR

Another community-facing aspect of Penn Vet's Shelter Animal Medicine Program is a partnership with Pets for Life, an initiative of the Humane Society of the United States that provides free spay/neuter and wellness care for pets in underserved communities. Penn Vet has partnered with the program since 2013, an arrangement that enhances the education of veterinary students while providing animals with care they need—but which their owners may not be able to afford.

Philadelphia is one of the core locations of Pets for Life and has become a model of success; the program has since expanded to 30 cities, concentrating in pet service “deserts.” In Philadelphia alone, more than 13,000 pets have been seen as part of the program.

“Over three-quarters of the clients in the program have never been to a veterinarian,” Watson says. “We’re able to be this link for these individuals to trust veterinarians and understand why this care is so important.”

As part of their shelter medicine rotation, Penn Vet students in their third or fourth year do neighborhood outreach with Pets for Life each Thursday morning. Sometimes it’s to check up on pets who have been neutered or vaccinated; other times it’s pure door-to-door canvassing, striking up conversations with residents about their pets.

These visits give the students real-world experience in primary veterinary care. In any given outing, they may encounter everything from ear mites and skin diseases to behavioral problems and undiagnosed masses.

Also important, Watson notes, is that the students learn how to communicate effectively so they earn clients’ trust and help them understand how to best care for their pets. “It’s really special to see that vet-client-patient relationship grow,” she says.

Ashley Mutch, manager for Philadelphia’s Pets for Life program, says a common reaction when potential clients first learn about the program is skepticism. “They’ll say, ‘What’s the catch?’ We say right away there is none, but it still often takes multiple visits for them to believe us,” she explains.

In the course of a morning this past spring, a few car-loads of Penn Vet students, staff, and faculty as well as Pets for Life staff visited four homes: checking on an aquarium’s water quality for pet fish, administering vaccinations for rabies and parvovirus, conducting physical exams, providing preventive flea medication, setting up appointments for animals to be neutered at a local clinic, and encouraging pet owners to spread the word to the community about the program.



In one North Philadelphia rowhome, four students examined Pebbles, a friendly Cocker Spaniel that was a little overweight but otherwise healthy. “She has a great hairdo,” Hannah MacAyeal, V’16, told Billy, Pebbles’ owner.

During the course of the visit, the group broached more serious conversations, too. The students noticed that Pebbles could use an ear cleaning. After demonstrating a proper technique, Jessica Surman, V’15, handed a swab over to Billy to try it himself. In visits to other homes that day, the group shared information about the health benefits of spaying female dogs, such as a reduced risk of certain cancers, and counseled owners on post-surgical care for their animals.

Penn Vet’s involvement with Pets for Life, providing formal veterinary consulting and care, has allowed the program to improve animal outcomes and expand its impact.

“The partnership with Penn Vet has been amazing—I want to say life-changing,” says Mutch. “We’re able to serve so many more pets in such a huge way.”

A SECOND CHANCE

While engagement in the community is a growing part of reducing the population of shelter animals, working inside the shelters is still a key aspect of the Shelter Animal Medicine Program. Penn Vet has formed relationships with shelters around the Philadelphia area, including Pennsylvania SPCA, PAWS, Delaware County SPCA, Chester County SPCA, Morris Animal Refuge, and the Animal Care and Control Team of Philadelphia. Penn Vet students and faculty provide consultative services and medical care for animals in these facilities, including high-quality spay and neuter surgeries.

A new project at Penn Vet will enable students and clinicians to help even more animals than they might otherwise. Though many shelters are moving toward policies that help save all healthy and treatable animals, limited resources can mean that animals requiring specialty care might tax the boundaries of what a shelter has to give.

Now, an effort supported by a donation from the Richard Lichter Charity for Dogs aims to provide a safety net for some of these animals. The gift enables shelter dogs with complicated conditions that go beyond the expertise of the shelter to receive the care they need at Penn Vet’s Ryan Hospital.

“It’s an exciting opportunity to have this kind of commitment to shelter animals,” Watson says.

Philadelphia residents lined up for free pet vaccines and wellness information provided by Penn Vet students and Pets for Life on April 25, World Veterinary Day.



A donation from the Richard Lichter Charity for Dogs has enabled shelter dogs with complicated conditions to receive the care they need at Penn Vet's Ryan Hospital. Pictured above is one of the first puppies to benefit from the new program, treated at Ryan Hospital's Emergency Service for a severe vaccine reaction.

Watson's team selects dogs for the program in collaboration with community shelter partners. After being discharged from the hospital, the animals live with a foster family and are made available for adoption.

"We choose animals that have a great prognosis in the long-term," Watson says, "meaning if we can just get them over this hump, they can have a nice, long, full life."

That "hump" could entail a broken bone, an infection, a congenital abnormality or, as was the case with the first four puppies treated in the program, a severe vaccine reaction.

Watson and colleagues worked with the Animal Care and Control Team of Philadelphia to rush those four pit bull mixes to Ryan's Emergency Service. The puppies had responded poorly to routine vaccinations and were vomiting and having seizures. Veterinarians at Ryan Hospital were able to provide fluids and medications, and closely monitor the dogs for two days, at which point they were healthy enough to go into foster care and await adoption—all but one, which made enough of an impression on a Penn Vet technician that he was adopted.

"Clinicians in the hospital were really supportive, flexible, and excited about the program," Watson says. "We're all so glad we have the opportunity to give these animals a second chance."

WELL-ROUNDED VETERINARIANS

Because Watson came into her position as a trained educator, it's no surprise that providing first-rate educational opportunities is a priority for the Shelter Animal Medicine Program. Watson is achieving this in a multitude of ways.

Students with a particular interest in shelter medicine can participate in intensive two-week rotations that include visits to all the partnering shelters, rounds with various Penn faculty members, Pets for Life outreach, and exposure to other professionals including animal control officers and lawyers who pursue animal cruelty cases. Students gain valuable hands-on experience in conducting spay and neuter surgeries and performing physical exams with primary case responsibility. With guidance from Dr. Carlo Siracusa, Director of Penn Vet's Behavior Service, they also practice veterinary behavioral techniques including reading body language and making recommendations for enrichment, training, and socialization.

In addition, students learn from practitioners and Penn Vet faculty such as Dr. James Serpell, Director of the Center for the Interaction of Animals and Society, about subjects from the ethics of maintaining feral cat colonies to biosecurity concerns in shelters to the role of shelter medicine in epidemiology and public health. During their time “off,” many students volunteer at shelter-run spay/neuter and vaccine clinics, giving back to the community and further honing their skills. To complement these experiences, a new online curriculum that utilizes best practices for education will be available to students starting this fall.

Penn Vet third-year students can also participate in a shelter medicine elective. The students prepare literature reviews on the newest shelter research and plans for disease management which, at the end of the course, are available to shelters to integrate into their own protocols.

A student-driven emergency preparedness elective is also being developed in conjunction with Dr. Lisa Murphy, Director of the Pennsylvania Animal Diagnostics Laboratory System, and Dr. Cindy Otto, Executive Director of Penn Vet’s Working Dog Center. This interdisciplinary elective will be open to the public.

Looking ahead, Watson hopes to purchase a mobile unit for surgical, medical, and educational outreach. She also aims to provide more training opportunities—not only for current Penn Vet students but also for working clinicians with an interest in continuing their education. It’s a full plate, Watson says, but “each component helps support a comprehensive approach to shelter animal medicine that helps increase awareness of animal welfare issues for veterinarians and the general public.”

“Working in shelter medicine is really special,” she adds. “Our goals are to create opportunities for life-long learning and continue this outreach and compassionate care.”



Mobile Unit Gifts to be Matched

The Shelter Animal Medicine Program’s new mobile unit promises to significantly expand the program’s teaching capacity and the quality and breadth of services offered to the community. Through the generous support of the John T. and Jane A. Wiederhold Foundation, we are excited to announce that gifts made by December 31, 2015, toward the purchase of the mobile unit will be matched dollar for dollar up to \$150,000. For more information, please contact Helen Radenkovic, Director of Development for Companion Animals, at 215-898-2029 or hrad@vet.upenn.edu.

HELPING PETS, HELPING PEOPLE

Watch this video to learn how Penn Vet and the Pets for Life program serve the community.

www.vet.upenn.edu/shelter-medicine-video

